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Jill Lewis. *Workers and Politics in Occupied Austria, 1945-55.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. 224 pp. $89.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7350-2.

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Austria's Working Classes in the Cold War

Jill Lewis's study usefully combines four narrative strands which have often been treated separately in Austrian historiography: the reestablishment of national sovereignty; the avoidance of the communist "people's democracy" which was imposed on Austria's eastern neighbors; the evolution of the structures of elite collaboration, usually labeled Austro-corporatism or "consociationalism"; and the evasion of responsibility for Nazi misdeeds. Though the integration is not always successful, Lewis's book represents a significant step towards an appreciation of the complex interactions of Austrian labor politics and the Cold War. To do this in just over two hundred pages (admittedly with a rather perfunctory final chapter) is a considerable achievement.

The workers who are at the heart of Lewis's account were heirs to a rich intellectual tradition of Austro-Marxist theory and militant praxis, but they emerged from eleven years of suppression highly fragmented, partially demoralized, and not untainted by Nazism. The hardship of everyday life in postwar Austria, with the official daily ration dropping to less than 1,000 calories, workplaces destroyed, and the black market dominant, provided plenty of potential for unrest. In those conditions the shift by the Socialist leadership from prewar idealism or "romanticism" (Lewis's term) to pragmatism was never likely to be straightforward. The imposition of "discipline" within the trade union movement was challenged by the Communists (KPÖ) as well as the Left (Revolutionary Socialists) within the party. Though Socialist politicians and labor leaders were now included in governmental decision-making to an unprecedented degree (Johann Böhm, the head of the Austrian Trade Union Federation and multiple-office-holder, is a key figure in Lewis's account), they also became identified, willy-nilly, with the hard conditions and prevailing shortages. The "corporatist" decision making later so widely admired and studied outside Austria brought a series of deeply unpopular wage and price agreements which made it difficult to sell cooperation with the class enemy. Though the acceptance by the People's Party (ÖVP) of an extensive nationalization measure in order to block Soviet claims on German assets was, admittedly, a striking reversal and meant that much Austrian heavy industry was placed under state control, it made little immediate difference to living conditions. Of course calls for restraint and the promise of jam tomorrow reflected Austria's underlying parlous economic plight, and the real fear of a return to the supposedly "unviable" First Republic, but, as Lewis shows, it also exposed the Socialists (SPÖ) to the risk of being outflanked by the Communists. In May 1947 demonstrators against food shortages in Vienna nearly stormed the Federal Chancellory and in October 1950 the fourth prices and wages agreement provoked what Lewis calls the most serious workers' unrest since the 1934 civil war.

The political context of this balancing act was an increasingly unpopular Allied occupation and the tensions of the Cold War. Lewis stresses the strangeness of Austria's position straddling the Iron Curtain, without romanticizing it as a kind of Austrian exceptionalism, as some historians have done. Overall she argues that the Communist threat was first exaggerated and then instrumentalized by the government and Socialist leaders in order to discredit Communist opposition. The Communist takeovers in Hungary and Czechoslovakia appeared to be a resounding warning from next door and it was easy to overlook the significantly different context in which they occurred. Thereafter condemning resistance to economic and labor policies as Communist putsch attempts became a regular feature of Austrian politics. Lewis, in line with most recent historiography, views this spinning skeptically. She sees the unrest in October 1950 not as an attempted putsch but a spontaneous response to the prospect of swinging price rises. Its force took some of

Austrian Communists by surprise and the Soviet authorities gave the strikers only sporadic support.

On wider Soviet ambitions Lewis is also fairly skeptical. She argues that there was no Soviet blue-print for a takeover in April 1945 but views the establishment of an extraterritorial economic enclave (from property which the Soviet government claimed had been allocated to it under the terms of Potsdam) as an indication that it intended to remain in Austria "for the foreseeable future" (p. 90). Austria's acceptance of Marshall Plan aid the following year allowed it to mitigate at least some of the impact of its economic plight by subsidizing some food prices (often against the liberalizing inclinations of Marshall Plan administrators). It also made confrontation with the Soviet authorities and the Communists (who left the government soon afterwards) inescapable. Whether this also made the Soviet Union more determined to take over the country is debatable. Lewis argues that the KPÖ had lost most of its credit in Moscow after its dismal showing in the 1945 election (when it gained only 5.4 percent of the vote). Its failure to recoup its position despite the multiple reasons for discontent earned it continuous criticism from the Soviet authorities. This was usually couched as a failure to adopt the correct analysis or tactical line but in view of the basic anticommunism of much of the population and of course the experience of the Red Army in 1945 it is difficult to see how they could ever have recovered. Lewis argues that by 1949 the Soviet Union was probably ready to cut its losses and to do a deal with the West–so long as the (dollar) price was right. She might have made the case even more strongly for the spring of the previous year, when Soviet policy was clearly directed towards agreeing to a treaty and ending the occupation. In Moscow Andrei Zhdanov told reluctant Austrian Communist leaders that "the independence of the country cannot be based on the presence of foreign forces."[1] If the West did not on this occasion think it was "safe" to leave Austria it was because they placed more weight on the apparent strategic dangers of a withdrawal than on the strength of Austria's grand coalition, which, despite the strains discussed by Lewis, was firmly united in its anticommunism.

As far as Austria's Nazi involvement is concerned the implication of Lewis's account is that the lack of internal democracy coupled with top-down decision making in the labor movement mirrored the wider Austrian evasions about Nazi rule. In her assessment of both the Nazi period and post-Nazi evasions she reinforces the critical conclusions of Anton Pelinka, Günter Bischof, Evan Bukey, and others.[2] The Anschluss brought "a great deal of relief and support for the absorption of the country," with many Austrians endorsing at least some of the more rabid aspects of Nazism and workers too were "not totally immune to anti-Semitism" (pp. 26-28). Lewis criticizes postwar attempts at collective exculpation constructed on the "victim myth" (e.g., the 1946 government documentary collection "Justice for Austria"). This thread gets slightly lost until it comes to the electoral and industrial politics of 1949 when, as Lewis notes, there was anti-establishment cooperation between shop stewards on the far Right and those of the Communist Party. In her conclusion, which is hard to disagree with, Lewis notes that the lack of accountability and debate went much further than social and wages policy. Austria's "consensus culture was based on myopia" and decades later its failings were "exposed by both the Waldheim Affair and the Haider phenomenon" (p. 204).

Notes

[1]. Günter Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War: The Leverage of the Weak* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Anton Pelinka, *Austria: Out of the Shadow of the Past* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998); and Evan Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era, 1938-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[2]. Giulano Procacci, ed., *The Cominform: Minutes of the Three Conferences 1947/1948/1949* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), 490; see also Wolfgang Mueller's more recent *Die Sowjetische Besatzung in Österreich 1945-1955 und ihre Mission* (Vienna/Cologne/Weimar: Böhlau, 2005), 195-198, which overlooks the significance of the discussion for Soviet intentions.

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